

Reflections on the Psychological Terms *Self* and *Identity* in Relation to the Concept of *Face* for the Analysis of Online Forum Communication

1. Introduction

In online forums people may upload a picture, a signature and other features to extend their user profile. They create an avatar (Stephenson 1992), a representation of ‘one-self’ (not necessarily ‘their self’) or a virtual identity. Users’ interaction in an online forum both by means of their avatars and text is of interest for the concept of *face* as a term of linguistic politeness. Politeness research in traditional face-to-face environments (cf. Brown/Levinson 1978/1987; Leech 1983; Watts 2003) has been transferred to computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments (cf. Thaler 2012; Locher 2010; Angouri/Tseliga 2010; Fuentes Rodríguez/Alcaide Lara 2009). However, the main focus of these studies is on the verbally expressed content. Very little has been investigated on a multimedial basis (cf. Alcaide Lara 2009 on advertisement; Thaler 2012: 139-143 on emoticons) as i.e. available in an online forum.

Face is frequently mentioned in (im)politeness research although it is independently established not only in pragmatics but also in sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, communication studies, psychology, and others (Haugh/Bargiela-Chiappini 2010: 2073).

Spencer-Oatey (2007: 640) attested that for a profound understanding of the concept of face a multidisciplinary approach is required, especially of social psychology and linguistics. Locher (2008) argues similarly concerning the concept of face in regard to *identity* concepts.

Social psychology is the field where research and discussions about self have been going on for over a decade and where the distinction to the term identity has been developed and addressed. The self or the psychology of the self has been of great interest by psychological researchers especially from the 1980s onwards (cf. Mummendey's (1995) "Psychologie der Selbstdarstellung" ("Psychology of Self Presentation"), the volume of Greve (2000) "Psychologie des Selbst" ("Psychology of the Self") or Brandtstädter's (2007) monographic study on the flexible self).¹

In this paper, I reflect on the terms self, identity and face. Hence, I will give (psychological) definitions of the terms self and identity and differentiate the two terms before I detail the concept of face. I also align possible distinctions between the terms self, identity and face to determine which applies best to describe the impact of online forum avatars and the related communication to other users. The focus of my investigation is on what content they create and on how they behave online. I will exemplify the use of face in a qualitative analysis in the Spanish online forum *Crepúsculo* (*Twilight*). My aim is to show that out of the three terms only face is best applicable to be investigated in online forum communication.²

¹ A recent publication by Prinz 2013 with its focus on volition and intentionality shows that the topic of *self* is still up to date.

² To avoid terminological confusion I will use the adjectives positive and negative in their evaluative and most obvious or lay person's meaning and not as introduced by Brown and Levinson 1978/1987 for their politeness theory as scientific terms.

2. Self, identity and face

The term *identity* is used in many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and computer science. It has become a 'common' term and it is often not exactly referred to its meaning in a particular context. It gets even more confusing if the term *self* comes in (Ashmore/Jussim 1997: 5). The concepts of *self* and *identity* are often conflated as mentioned in Kresic (2006: 65) and as a consequence treated as synonyms. In some cases, it seems that there is an unmentioned difference (cf. Hogg/Vaughan 2008; McKinlay/McVittie 2008). However, terminological clarification is seen as a condition for understanding in the field of social psychology (Greve 2000: 16). Some studies on *identity* have already raised the necessity to differentiate *identity* and *self* (cf. Kresic 2006 or Harris's 1989 distinction of person, individual and self³). It is also noted that the distinction of the two terms is rather discussed in psychological literature (Kresic 2006: 65). Yet, the two terms are not of pure psychological interest. Köhler (2003) also discusses the boundaries and denominators of *identity* and *self* in his interdisciplinary doctoral thesis "Das Selbst im Netz" ("The Self on the Internet") in which he describes the notion of self in CMC.

The terminological clarification becomes even more important as soon as another concept is brought up to the spotlight: *face*. The notion of *face*, originally derived from Goffman (1955/1967), is frequently used in the context of linguistic politeness (cf. Brown/Levinson 1978/1987; Watts 2003; Locher/Watts 2005), although its independence from linguistic politeness is also discussed (cf. Gar-

³ From an anthropologic point of view Harris 1989 tries to draw a line between terminologies such as "person, self and individual". (For a distinction of 'agent, individual and person' see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013: 9-10). Therefore, he sometimes uses the term *identity* to describe the *self* (cf. Harris 1989: 601) but does not treat the two terms as synonyms (cf. Harris 1989: 602).

cés-Conejos Blitvich 2013: 1).⁴ In this paper I focus on what exactly is meant by the concepts *self*, *identity* and *face*. The following chapters discuss each term separately to bring up differences between the terms and determine an appropriate terminological usage with regard to the analysis of online forum communication.

2.1. Self

The *Academic Dictionary of Psychology* defines *self* as “[a] symbol-using individual who can reflect upon their own behaviour” (Chopra 2005: 236). In this definition the introspection is highlighted. Thereafter, it is no surprise that *self* sometimes is equated with individual (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013: 9). According to Mummendey (1995: 54) the *self* represents the subjective view of an individual on himself. *Personality* can be used for a more objective point of view of an individual (ibid.). The *self* is not to be seen as a person within a person, but more how people see, describe and perceive themselves currently or retrospectively (Greve 2000: 16). Yet, current circumstances may not be a part of ourselves.⁵ To differentiate the *self* from the self concept, Mummendey (1995: 56) refers to the *self* “as a concept of one’s one personality” (ibid., my translation) and to the self concept as an “attitude to oneself” (ibid., my translation). As the self concept is part of the *self*, one can simply speak of *the self*. Other psychologists such as Greve (2000) and Brandtstädter (2007) describe “the self as a dynamic system” (Greve 2000: 17) and a “flexible process” (Brandtstädter 2007: 11f.; Greve 2000: 99).

⁴ The terms *face* and *identity* are for example distinguished in Arundale 2006, further discussed in Spencer-Oatey 2007 and in the *Journal of Politeness Research* on *face* and *identity* (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013).

⁵ For example, it is not part of our *self* that we wear a red pullover today (Greve 2000: 20).

Drawing on psychological literature mentioned, the *self* can be referred to as cognitive thinking of oneself in real life.

Brewer and Gardner (1996: 84) add another dimension by distinguishing three levels of self-representation:

- (1) [a]t the individual level, the personal self [...]", (2) "[...] at the interpersonal level, the relational self [...]", (3) "[...] at the group level, the collective self [...]" (Brewer/Gardner 1996: 84).

The latter corresponds to the concept of *social identity* (cf. Hogg/Abrams 1988; cf. below McKinlay/McVittie 2008). It becomes obvious from their definition that there is an intersection to the term *identity* (cf. Brewer/Gardner 1996).

2.2. Identity

In everyday life, *identity* is often equalled with characteristics. From a psychological point of view, Mummendey (1995: 57; 2006: 85) speaks of *identity* as an opposition to social roles (i.e. an individual can be a mother, a teacher, etc.). Although our behaviour may vary according to the role we incorporate in a certain moment, we are still the same person. The concept of *identity* – more than the concept of *self* – marks the distinctive, consistent and unique of an individual (Mummendey 1995: 54; Mummendey 2006: 85). Other scholars broaden the term *identity* by adding different perspectives. For example, McKinlay/McVittie (2008: 39) regard *identity* as a discursive phenomenon that is socially negotiated. They highlight the importance of context in which *identity* is reflected (McKinlay/McVittie 2008: 22). They categorise *identity* in "conversational identity"⁶ as "[...] immediate identities of speaker, listener [...]" (McKinlay/McVittie 2008: 23).

⁶ A similar approach to conversational identities is that of *narratives identities*. For this approach see Locher/Bolander in this volume.

In the context of online interaction they speak of “virtual identities” and define them as “[f]orms of identity that people take up in online communication and communities” (McKinlay/McVittie 2008: 37). In their summary, they claim that

Identities are not simply features or products of the individual, but rather should be viewed as practices within interactions with others and the outcomes of those interactions (McKinlay/McVittie 2008: 39).

Therefore, it can be stated that *identity* is also relational. Locher (2008: 511) takes a slightly different notion stating that “[...] identity refers to the ‘product’ of [...] linguistic and non-linguistic processes” drawing on the sociolinguistic framework of Bucholtz and Hall (2005) and on a definition of *identity* by Mendoza-Denton (2002: 475). According to Mendoza-Denton

[i]dentity [...] is neither attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis. (ibid.)

It is important to stress that *identity* is both individual and collective (i.e. being a teacher and sharing a *group identity* towards other teachers). This is also acknowledged in McKinlay/McVittie (2008: 41) and Hogg/Vaughan (2008: 123). Norris (2011) researched people’s *identity* intensively for a long time concluding

[...] when investigating real people in their everyday lives identity emerges; it becomes visible, explainable, and graspable. (Norris 2011: xiii)

As a consequence, I sum up that *identity* is consistent over a period of time and can be described as what a person identifies with individualistically and socially.

2.3. Face

Face in the sense of i.e. pragmatic research is a second-order term.⁷ It is defined top down as a scientific concept and should not be confused with the lay concept of face as part of the body. Goffman first defined the concept of face in “On face-work: an analysis of ritual elements in social interaction” which was published in *Psychiatry* in 1955 and reprinted in *Interaction ritual* in 1967. Thereafter, face can be described as

[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. (Goffman 1967: 5)

In their politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) draw on the concept of *face* from Goffman (1955/1967) but use it in a more individualistic way. For them *face* can be equated to social wants (Brown/Levinson 1987: 62). Spencer-Oatey (2007: 639) noted that in defining *face* there is most likely a reference to the *self*. For example, Goffman describes *face* as “[...] an image of the self [...]” (1967: 5). Brown and Levinson define it as

[...] the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself [...]. These are just two examples for a connection of *face* to *self*.⁸ (Brown/Levinson 1987: 61)

Others favour a stronger separation of the above terms. Haugh and Chiappini (2010: 2073), as an example, call for an independent face theory aside from politeness (Haugh/Chiappini 2010: 2078).⁹ Arundale (2010: 2078), in the same issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics*, comes up with an independent ‘Face Constitution Theory

⁷ I refer to first- and second-order politeness which was first introduced by Eelen 2001. See Watts 2003: 9-12 for further discussion of the two notions of politeness.

⁸ For more references on *self* in definitions of *face* see Spencer-Oatey 2007: 639.

⁹ It remains unclear how this can be achieved without noticing the involved culture-specific elements but not being completely driven by them (Haugh/Chiappini 2010: 2078).

(FCT)' stating that "[...] Face Constitution Theory employs a new conceptualisation of 'face' in terms of the *relationship* two or more persons create with one another in interaction." He distinguishes his concept of *face* from person centered attributes such as public self-image (Goffman 1955/1967), social identity, or social wants (Brown/Levinson 1987). Arundale describes *face*

[...] as a relational and interactional phenomenon arising in everyday talk/conduct, as opposed to a person-centered attribute understood as determining the shape of an individual's utterance. (Arundale 2010: 2079)

Face can only be achieved conjointly, in relation with others and does not belong to a single individual (Arundale 2010: 2085). Although Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013: 15) appreciates Arundale's (2010) effort to conceptualise *face* aside from the Goffmanian definition, she is against splitting up *face* completely from *identity*. The above opinions emphasise how interesting it is to relate the three terms *self*, *identity* and *face* to each other.

2.4. Identity and self in relation to face

Goffman (1955/1967) defines *face* explicitly as a positive value. In contrast, *identity* can be evaluated on a scale from negative to positive. To point out one of the core distinguishing arguments between *face* and *identity*, imagine a person who belonged to a violent gang for years, went to prison and now refrains from his violent, false behaviour which was part of his *identity* although it was negative (cf. also McKinlay/McVittie 2008: 24). *Identity* does not have to be positive (cf. also Spencer-Oatey 2007: 643). Let us think of another example: A person is teaching her mother tongue English. Her profession is not special to her; it is just her job and she is satisfied to have it. Hence, identifying with the profession as an English teacher might be perceived as neutral. Of course, these

evaluations may vary from person to person and within different contexts (Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644). Nevertheless, these examples show that *identity* can be seen as negative, neutral or positive. Furthermore, it does not only have to be an individual identification but people might also identify as member of a group (i.e. English teachers). Therefore, as already mentioned, *identity* is also not only an individual phenomenon (as classified by i.e. Arundale 2006: 202).

For Goffman and his work, it can be stated, as did Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013: 9-15), that he conceptualises *identity* (cf. Goffman 1963) and *face* (Goffman 1955/1967) very close to each other. Yet, I propose to add another distinguishing aspect to separate the terms *identity* and *face*: historicity. Let us think again about the English teacher. Imagine she just started teaching a short time ago. Of course, she would like to be seen and accepted as a teacher in her working environment (as part of her *face*) although she might not yet *identify* (in terms of *identity*) with being a teacher or belonging to the group of teachers. According to Greve (2000: 18), it is important to consider that *identity* is built through one's own history more than through characteristics, roles, and attributes. However, in my opinion *identity* is not graspable only by analysing communication in an online forum. *Face* does not necessarily need historicity to be accepted or negotiated.¹⁰ This distinguishes *identity* from *face* and was also addressed by Haugh and Chiappini (2010: 2073). *Face* can be seen as a mask (Locher 2004: 52). We

¹⁰ I only focus on western societies. My distinction between *identity* and *face* with regard to historicity does not apply to Chinese culture where I consider *face* to be a more important societal phenomenon and thus more enduring as mentioned by Ho 1994: 274. Spencer-Oatey 2005 divides the two notions of *face* into a situation specific *face* which she calls "identity face" and "responsibility face" as a pan-situational concept which is in line with Ho's definition above. I consider her term *identity face* as very confusing and therefore do not follow her labels. Nevertheless I agree that the Chinese or Asian notion of *face* is different and not covered in my conception.

‘wear’ it in a particular situation but get rid of it in another moment and take a different one. It becomes difficult to know what a person behind this mask is pretending or what is really true. We take a certain role or mask to be seen, negotiated, accepted, and approved by others, not just for ourselves. *Face* thus is clearly relational (here I agree with Arundale 2006: 202; Locher and Watts 2005; Locher 2008; Spencer-Oatey 2007). In the context of online communication (i.e. forums) the only available information can be extracted from the user posts. Instead of mask or role McKinlay/McVittie speak of “virtual identity” (2008: 37). So *identity* and *face* might have an intersection when speaking of *identity* as a (temporary) role which someone has in a particular context. As a result, on the one hand, I suggest using the term *identity* to stress continuity over history and a deeper incorporation into a person’s belief of himself. On the other hand, *face* can be more specific and observable in particular situations which are not necessarily explored over a long period of time. This includes how people want to be seen in a particular situation and therefore it is (usually) positive.¹¹

Concerning the relation of *face* and *self*, Chen (2001) stresses the importance of *self-face* by his dichotomic model of self-politeness on the one hand and other-politeness on the other hand. Traditional politeness models such as the other-politeness model of Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) focus on the speaker and his intention of being polite towards the other. Chen (2001: 89) adds that not only *face of the other* but also *face of self* or *self-face* can be vulnerable. The notion of self-face leads to a combination of the terms *self* and *face*. For his *self-face* proposal, Chen takes a broad definition of

¹¹ Of course there might be users who voluntarily try to disturb a discussion by acting impolitely on the internet and voluntarily create a negative *face* of themselves, such as Trolls. This can be seen as a special case of *face* and is not incorporated in the definition of *face* by Goffman 1955/1967.

Self and Identity in Relation to the Concept of Face

self as “[t]he term ‘self’, it should be noted, does not only refer to the speaker herself, but also those aligned with the speaker: her family, friends, colleagues, clients, and even her profession” (2001: 88, emphasis mine).¹² One distinguishing characteristic is that *self-face* is shown towards others whereas *self* is rather internal. It is the way a person thinks about himself, both positively and negatively. *Face* – and *self-face* hereafter – is in most cases positive (cf. Goffman’s quote above) and conveys how a person wants to be seen by others. In summary, the three terms can be distinguished by (1) **self** can be described as (internal) thoughts about oneself, (2) **identity** is linked to continuity or historicity and (3) **face** is rather situational and how we want to be seen by others and therefore external.

2.5. Self, identity and face for analysing online forum communication

As Harris mentioned, *self* can be regarded as a “psychological conceptualisation” (1989: 599). According to Spencer-Oatey (2009: 152) *self* is the notion that links *identity* and *face*. Yet, there are differences as outlined in the previous chapter. To keep the terms clear for the analysis, I will explain in the following what I mean by speaking of *self*, *identity* and *face*, especially in the context of CMC. I will use the two oppositions “internal/embodied” – “external/disembodied” meaning ‘only in our thoughts, brain’ (internal or embodied) and ‘communicated, shared and discussed

¹² To illustrate an alignment of *self*, Chen 2001: 88 gives the example of a White House Speaker who acts according to a kind of corporate identity towards a public audience. *Self* in this context is clearly relational as it is defined by the representation of a person of an item she can identify with towards others.

with others' (external or disembodied). Fig. 1 at the end of this chapter illustrates the distinction graphically.¹³

Following Greve (2000) *self* can be seen as what a person thinks about himself because of past or present experiences or what he wishes for himself in the future (see fig. 1). *Self* is usually an embodied and internal notion.¹⁴ Furthermore, what a person thinks of himself has also impact on what he identifies with and vice versa. This is illustrated in fig. 1 by the arrows linking *self* with *identity*.

Identity in relation to *self* describes what shapes the *self*. Although strongly interrelated, the notion of *identity* is different to the notion of self. Historicity plays a crucial part as explained previously. It is mostly internal and embodied but can also become external and disembodied. This is especially the case when thinking of a *group identity*, such as for example the group of baseball players and doctors (see arrows between *identity* and the pictures at the bottom of fig. 1). As a result, *identity* is both an internal and external notion.

Face – on the other hand – is only a relational phenomenon, and therefore external and disembodied as highlighted by the bold arrow passing through the two computers in fig. 1. In this context, and as a sub-category of *face*, *self-face* refers to the *face* which a speaker addresses speaking of himself whereas *face of the other* is the *face* a speaker addresses by referring to another participant (in a forum for example). What a person tells an (online) audience about herself (be it true or not) relates to her *self-face*. The only information accessible is the presentation and communication online which is related to the concept of *face*. This fact allows the conclu-

¹³ The two individuals mark the interaction (a woman and a man for a gender perspective).

¹⁴ In the English language there is even the suffix which hints at the embodied or referential component, as we refer to ourselves speaking of 'myself, yourself, himself' and so on.

sion that *face* is the only applicable concept when analysing CMC or more specifically forum communication.¹⁵

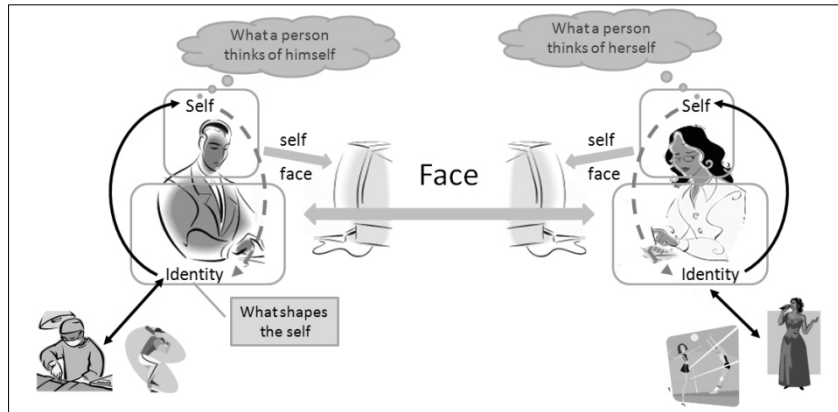


Fig. 1: Notions of identity, self and face in CMC

3. Analysis of a multicodeal online forum thread

Using these concepts to analyse an online corpus of a forum thread, it is evident to find external or disembodied content which is content that is verbalised or expressed in a certain way. In online forums people have the opportunity to express themselves; besides plain text they can also use nonverbal content such as (ani-

¹⁵ Let me quote an example which was given by a German participant at a Romance languages and literatures conference to support the differences between *self* and *identity* on the one hand and *face* on the other hand. She mentioned that she intentionally selected Spanish as her nationality to appear in her user profile in Spanish online discussion forums. Of course her real nationality is German and it is likely that she also identifies with the German language community. However, when she is acting online her *face* is Spanish as she wants to be seen as a member of the Spanish language community and not as a foreigner.

mated) pictures, videos, emoticons etc.¹⁶ So the content in users' posts may include verbal (words), nonverbal ((animated) pictures) and paraverbal information (bold or italic letters, lengthening of words etc.) (cf. Langlotz/Locher 2012: 1600). This is referred to as *multicodal* content as the given information is based on different codes (cf. Weidenmann 2002: 47).

To find out what people show about themselves and how this can be classified using the terms *self*, *identity* and *face*, I will qualitatively analyse a thread of the Spanish fan-forum *Crepúsculo*¹⁷ around the saga *Twilight* by examining multicodal content such as profile pictures and verbal utterances.

The thread I examine in particular is called "Actores adecuados para crepusculo?" (Adequate actors for *Twilight*, my translation¹⁸) and was opened by the user k@th3rin in April 2009. The thread holds 50 posts in total and was actively discussed until October 2012.

Fig. 2 shows the initial post of k@th3rin. She clearly states her position: "Yo amo a Robert Pattinson y me cae bien Kristen!!" She loves Robert Pattinson and likes Kristen [Stewart], the two actors who play the protagonists Edward and Bella of the *Twilight* saga. One can neither speak of Kristen's or Robert's self nor of their identity. Yet, k@th3rin shows something about her self-face and positions herself. Later on in the same post, she writes about Kristen Stewart quite differently saying: "bueno para mi Kristen Stewart....no me gusta para nada!!" which is a face-threatening act (FTA) towards Kristen Stewart as well as to all her fans who might feel attacked by this utterance. She even redefines her position in

¹⁶ The information one is able to add to his profile varies from forum to forum. Standard in most communication forums is a user name accompanied by a picture.

¹⁷ The Spanish forum *Crepúsculo* (*Twilight*) is used by fans of the *Twilight* films to talk about their affiliation, the story, the actors etc.

¹⁸ All translations from Spanish to English that follow are my own.

Self and Identity in Relation to the Concept of Face

favour of Robert Pattinson and against Kristen Stewart who she would like to see replaced by the actress Ashley Grenne.

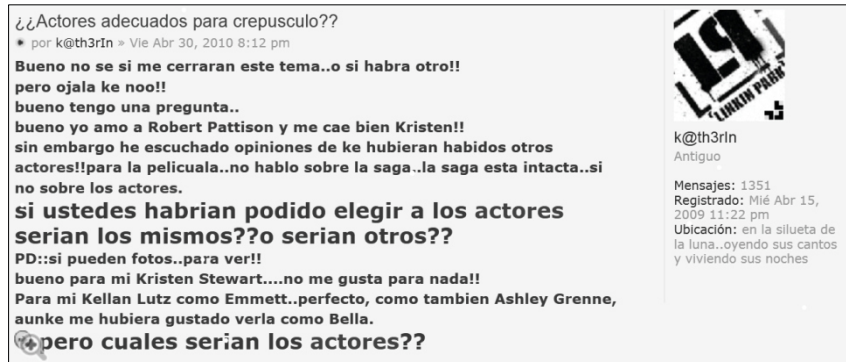


Fig. 2: Initial post of k@th3rin

By looking at the profile picture of k@th3rin in fig. 2, one would not connect it to *Twilight* directly. In her profile picture she makes reference to the US-American rock band *Linkin Park*. Nevertheless, there is a connection between the band and the film(s) as they are part of the soundtrack.¹⁹ So there is a link between her profile picture and the topic of the forum but it is only indirect and therefore not directly visible on the surface. This can be seen as an *in-group* marker. Fans of *Twilight*, its Soundtrack or band *Linkin Park* will regard her as 'one of them'. With this indirect 'message' k@th3rin shows something about her face – we do not know if she identifies in real life with *Linkin Park* but one can see that she wants to be recognised in the forum by the picture of *Linkin Park*.

¹⁹ The first film of the *Twilight* saga with their song "Leave out all the rest" (as the second song in the end credits).

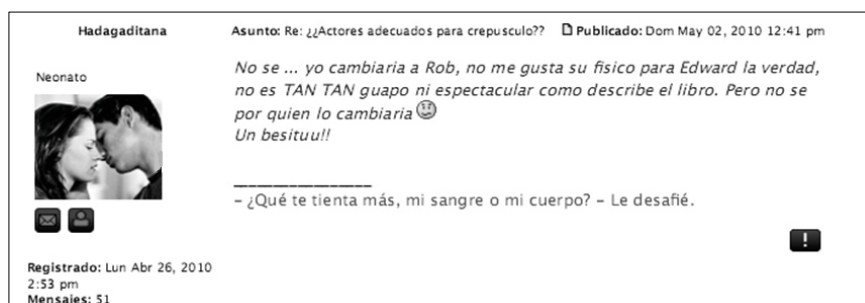


Fig. 3: Post of Hadagaditana

A direct link to the film can be found in the profile of the user Hadagaditana (fig. 3). Her profile picture shows Jacob (another protagonist in *Twilight*) and Bella kissing. Jacob, as a member of the werewolves, might be seen as an opponent to Edward who is a vampire. They are both in love with Bella and aim to win her heart. So by just uploading the picture as part of her avatar, Hadagaditana positions herself and shows that she is in favour of Jacob. Her posts underline her position. As an example, she writes in fig. 3 that she would change Robert Pattinson because she does not like his physical appearance and puts stress on that “no es TAN TAN guapo ni espectacular como describe el libro” (he is neither SO SO handsome nor spectacular as described in the book).



Fig. 4: Profile video clip sequence of maryche

Self and Identity in Relation to the Concept of Face

In contrast to Hadagaditana, maryche positions herself in an opposite direction. Her profile picture consists of the three pictures which can be seen in fig. 4.²⁰ The first picture is the family emblem of the Cullen Family. The second image consists of a picture of Edward holding Bella in his arms and looking at her while she holds herself tight to his arm. The third picture is the writing “I Do” which is the matrimony pledge of Edward and Bella in the fourth film (*Breaking Dawn – part one*). These pictures portray the user maryche as a fan of Edward winning the heart of Bella.

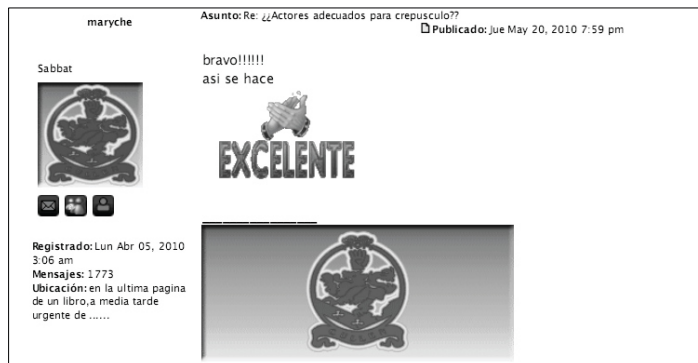


Fig. 5: Multicodal post of maryche with clapping hands

As it is also permitted to post pictures within a post, maryche uses pictures and videos not only in her profile but also to strengthen and underline her written words. The hands in fig. 5 are clapping as an animated picture, reinforcing her words “bravo!!!! asi se hace” (“bravo!!!! that’s how you do it”). She expresses her agreement with a previous post of k@th3rin. Pictures and videos are often a trigger for (further) comments as shown in the example of the related post by k@th3rin in fig. 6. After expressing laughter

²⁰ The three pictures are repeatedly shown one after another as a video clip.

("jajaj...") k@th3rin says she loves the picture of maryche by addressing her directly ("me ha encantado tu imagen...maryche !!!").



Fig. 6: Reference k@th3rin to post of maryche

These two posts (figs. 5 and 6) are face-enhancing acts (FEAs). In fig. 5, maryche reinforces the face of k@th3rin by agreeing with her and spending applause. In fig. 6, k@th3rin tells maryche that she loves her picture and therefore strengthens her face in choosing something good looking. To speak in terms of Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) both use politeness to enhance the face of the other. Interestingly, this is also done by nonverbal content such as the video of the clapping hands. As eye catcher it becomes topic in the ongoing conversation.

Of course, forum users do not only treat each other nicely by means of FEAs. There are many examples of FTAs in the thread as well. The following example from PekePsicopata (who does not have a profile picture) proves that people are aware of the fact that they might hurt other users' feelings. Before the utterance, she described two people who she would change for different actors and goes on as shown in fig. 7, which can be translated as follows: "I almost cried when I found out who would play Edward! (without offending his fans obviously!!!)".

Self and Identity in Relation to the Concept of Face

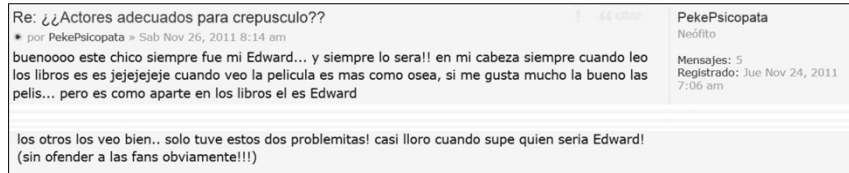


Fig. 7: Post of PekePsicopata with FTA

The user PekePsicopata threatens both the face of Edward/Robert Pattinson and of everyone affiliated to him as she expresses pity or sadness by uttering that she cried. This becomes obvious in her final remark (“sin ofender a las fans obviamente!!!”): She explicitly writes that she does not want to offend his fans. Despite her mitigation by admitting to not do it on purpose she risks to hurt. As mentioned by Goffman (1967: 42) we are aware that not only we but also other persons who share feelings for someone might be hurt by hurting that ‘loved’ person and not them directly. So we can threaten face indirectly and we are aware of it.

4. Conclusion

In my paper I have tried to show the differences between the terms *self*, *identity* and *face* in order to apply them in the analysis of online forum communication. Without further information about the users in real life, *face* seems to be the concept that is most appropriate for describing how people behave towards one another online.

One cannot speak of (real) *selves* of forum users by describing their avatars or other graphical and textual snippets although the persons behind these avatars might identify themselves with these musicians, actors or characters. We know too little from the analysis of the posts to name it identity, but of course, these avatars

shape the virtual identity of the users in the present forum albeit subject to change (i.e. animated avatar of maryche). This could indicate that virtual identity is not as consistent as the term *identity* implicates. It is doubtful that the historicity which is necessary to name a behaviour or character traits *identity* can be found online. As we do not know anything about the person behind the screen and what she thinks about herself (in real life), we cannot speak of *self*.

Speaking of *identity* requires deeper knowledge and insight of a person's mindset. To accompany someone or to have data of one and the same user over a period of time could be means to achieve this (as i.e. Norris (2011) did in her study). We could find reference to the *self* or the *identity* of a user from his utterances but one can never be sure without collecting further biographical data.

I hence conclude that it is best to use the concept of *face* to describe online behaviour of users through their posts and avatars. Avatars stand for an image, a (usually positive) value a person wants to be associated with in a forum.²¹ The above findings nevertheless encourage and make it in particular interesting to examine *face* in online communication.²² As online communication also consists of (animated) emoticons, text etc., multimedial information should be part of face work analysis in CMC (for a broader analysis see Fröhlich forthcoming). Especially, as soon as we do not analyse people's actions and statements in depth and at length 'behind the scene', it becomes questionable to speak of their *identity* according to the theoretical alignment in the first part. What people negotiate in online communication within a situational context is related to

²¹ Unless we analyse a troll or a person who intentionally aims to be impolite or rude towards others.

²² User names – although not dealt with in this article – are also part of face, i.e. PekePsicopata (LittlePsychopath). They also transport information a user shares with others. Their meaning – as part of face – can be reinforced or questioned through their online behaviour.

face. Through analysing *face* online we will see how – through which code (verbal, paraverbal or nonverbal) – and in which way it is approved or threatened by the actions of others.

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Self and Identity in Relation to the Concept of Face

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Uta Fröhlich

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